The Fourth Jhāna

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:31:43

So we talked about the third jhāna, which is characterized by its primary nimitta of that very exquisite, tender and lovely peacefulness. That's what's really characterizing it. I've pointed out at several stages now that this tender and lovely peacefulness and the exquisiteness of it is a very refined place—a very refined realm, a very refined state, a very refined texture.

Again, if you're not sure whether you've definitely reached this level—maybe you've been there before, maybe it feels peaceful and equanimous, maybe it feels very deep—the refinement is one of the things that tells you you've moved deeper.

Now refinement means more than just calming. Certainly when you move from pīti, which can have a lot of waves in it, to something like the third jhāna, there's a calming, and there's the peacefulness. But by refinement, I would use the analogy of different kinds of cloth. One cloth can be quite coarse—my jeans here, the cloth is quite coarse. A refined cloth actually has fewer fibers in it, less material, less substance to it.

This is trying to articulate what we mean by refined. It's almost gossamer-like in its refinedness at this level. Things are getting really, really refined. To say it's more refined is more than to say just that it's calmer. It is calmer, but its texture is very, very refined in that sense, like a refined material.

Some of you may know states of very deep relaxation. Some of you may even have experimented a little with sleep yoga practices, dream and in-between dream states. There are states that are very peaceful where really not much is happening, where the mind is not moving anywhere. But compared to something like the third jhāna, they don't have that refinement. They're thicker, more kind of velvety. They can be helpful, but when we talk about the peacefulness of the third jhāna, we're really talking about a very refined quality. That's part of what helps with the discernment.

But today I'd like to go on and talk about the fourth jhāna. Again, every time we move in the teachings or progress in the teachings, just a reminder about pacing. We're going on in the teachings to the fourth jhāna, but what's your pacing? That's the more important question. Where's your playground right now? The playground of your learning edge, the playground where you're spending most of your time marinating, exploring the elements of mastery. That's what will really help rather than zipping through at the pace that I'm going through, which will even get faster in the coming days because I've got some medical appointments.

So really, the encouragement to discern and attune your whole being and your practice to your sense of

your own playground, your learning edge, in dialogue with us. That's where you hang out, that's where you have your fun, that's where you work and play and marinate.

But the fourth jhāna—let's go back to the Buddha. He's gone through jhānas one, two, three, with both their more technical descriptions and then each one with their simile, with the lotus ponds. After the third jhāna, he says: "And furthermore, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation and distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna, which is purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. He sits permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness so that there is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness."

His simile is: "Just as if a person were sitting wrapped from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of their body to which the white cloth did not extend, even so, the practitioner sits permeating their body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of their entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness." That's his description of the fourth jhāna.

Technically, the jhāna factors are just two now. Ekaggatā, which we've had in everyone—this "with one thing prominent," that's how I'm translating it. One thing is prominent; the mind is gathered around and in and with one thing prominent. And that one thing prominent is the primary nimitta, which is technically upekkhā. And upekkhā, as we've been talking about the last few days, is equanimity. So technically, at least in the commentaries and in the Buddha's teachings, the two jhāna factors here are ekaggatā and upekkhā—one thing prominent and equanimity.

We talked about equanimity a little bit already. We'll talk about it a little bit more today and perhaps even more as the retreat goes on. If I had to find what I think is the most helpful and accurate English word that encompasses the experience here and points us in the right direction, I would say stillness. There is equanimity and that's important, but I would say stillness.

What strikes one almost overwhelmingly is being transfixed in and by an extremely refined, translucent stillness. That's the texture and the experience. We talked about refinement with the third jhana, and it's even more refined here. This is a really important discerning factor: Am I moving in the right direction? Do I need to shape this a little more? Have I gone off on a sidetrack?

It's extraordinarily refined. The cloth is now translucent. It's so subtle, so refined in its texture—the substance of the space that one is in—that it's as if it's translucent. It's also a very bright space. Not for everyone, not always, but it's very common at this point to have a white light. And that white light is the stillness. The stillness is the white light.

Technically, I would call it a secondary nimitta. This white light can come up earlier, but here it's an almost breathtaking white light of stillness. Usually it's a secondary nimitta. Sometimes people can have it as very pitch black, but more commonly there's this bright white light as the stillness, mixed with the stillness. Technically it's a secondary nimitta, but probably by this point it's quite organically mixed so that

it is the stillness. The light is the stillness, the stillness is the light.

This light—there's a brightness in the mind, and in a way that brightness is just a sign, signal, manifestation, reflection of the brightness of presence at that point, the aliveness of the mind. That's one way of understanding what's actually happening there. It's a reflection of the energy in the mind of being present, of being conscious.

When we read the Buddha's description, does it sound maybe less appealing than the other ones? A little less exciting than the lotus pond business and all the upwelling of happiness? But there's something—I want to translate it into experiential terms—almost stunning here, breathtaking. One feels this still light, this very, very refined still light. It's almost as if one is in another realm, breathing the air of another world, to quote an old poet.

In fact, somewhere in the Pali Canon, the Buddha gives it the synonym, the nickname, "the beautiful." It's called the beautiful. So hopefully this helps give a bit more sense than something that might sound disappointing. And again, like all the other jhanas, he refers to it as an escape, *nisaranam*. The Buddha talks that way about the jhanas at times, and this is also a sense we can have in it.

Once you're in this space, it really can feel like one is in another world. And that world is an escape from all the pleasure and pain and all the shakiness and all the complexity and difficulty of the world of the senses. So there is this way of experiencing it as an escape from this world in a dualistic relationship or comparison. This is a better place. And we can have that sense of being in this other realm.

But like with the third jhana we talked about, there's this possibility for the aftereffect of that experience to spill out onto the world and color our sense of the world, so that the essential nature of things, the essential nature of this world that we all agree on and feel that we inhabit, is perceived to be essentially stillness. It's the same process—where before it was perceived to be essentially peacefulness, now essentially stillness.

So there's the dualistic conception—a duality with the world where this is an escape and it's a much better place to be. There's that kind of thrust, both of teaching and experience. Then there's the thrust of: here's an experience and it opens my eyes, opens my senses and my felt sense of what this world really is and what the nature of this world really is. It's much less dualistic because then the world can be seen as being truly, in essence, this luminous transcendent stillness.

Much less dualistic.

And as we explore the third jhana, there's a third possibility emerging from the Buddha's teaching, where he emphasized all the jhanas as perception attainments on the way to pointing something out about the nature of perception—about the malleability of perception, about the dependent arising and thus the emptiness of all things.

So you could see it seemingly dualistically, seemingly non-dualistically, and in a way that transcends both because it understands the dependent arising of the perception of duality or non-duality, the dependent arising of this or that.

All this becomes really important when we come to understanding not just insight, but also where we're going with the path. What are we aiming for? What is liberation? And what does our path suggest about our relationship with the world? What kind of relationship and stance and view of the world does an awakened being have? A liberated being.

Do they see it as something to escape from, never to be reborn again into this world? There's a kind of dualistic conception, but there are other possibilities as well. It might sound like a technical point at this stage, but a lot ends up hinging on this—about how we want to live, about how we treat the planet, about our sense of awakening, all of that. We will return to this.

In the fourth jhana, the breath stops. One is no longer actually breathing, as far as one can tell. If you stay with the breath as your primary object all the way through, this will become very clear. The breath grows more and more subtle until eventually there is no breath. Or you might notice it, so to speak, out of the corner of your eye if you're doing another practice.

How is it that we don't die then? I don't know the answer to this. I assume we're breathing very, very subtly, and there's such stillness in the being at that point that we barely need to move any oxygen. Maybe others who know more about biology could explain it better, but that's my understanding.

One does continue to breathe, but technically the suttas say the breath stops, and most teachers would say the breath stops. You would be hard-pressed to find a perception of the breath there, even if breath was your main object. So the perception of the breath stops. My assumption is you're somehow still breathing, but because of the stillness and whatever is happening, the amount of oxygen actually moving to sustain the organism for sometimes quite long periods is very small. I don't actually know what's going on—it's neither here nor there, just thought I'd mention it.

The citta, though, is really captivated and transfixed by this translucent, very refined stillness—this sense of a beautiful realm of stillness. And again, it's still a rupa jhana. As the Buddha says, it's still pervading the whole body. This luminous stillness pervades the whole body. The body has become that.

So the citta is captivated and transfixed. And again, like the other jhanas, once you've gained quite a bit of experience with it, moving in and out of that jhana, you might begin to feel like, oh, now I actually have to learn how to develop the steadiness of my focus to stay steady on this really refined frequency, this really refined luminous texture. As always, sometimes at first it feels effortless, and then afterwards you start to realize there's subtle work and play to be done here. One aspect is simply learning to stay with this very refined stillness.

Another thing that can happen experientially at this stage is that the felt center of the citta, the felt center

of awareness, can drop. It might have dropped already in the second and third jhanas. Some people experience the center of the piti often around their face or throat. Sometimes people experience the center of the happiness around the heart chakra. When you get into the peacefulness, it's sometimes lower in the belly, and with the stillness it can feel like it's even lower—if I'm sitting on a chair, somewhere under here is where the center of my awareness can feel like it is.

This is a completely secondary phenomenon, so don't latch onto that. For some people, this is what they notice, and then they use that as an indicator or barometer of which jhana they're in. Not a very good idea because it's a secondary phenomenon. It's not reliable. We want to be really clear, as always: What's the primary nimitta here? This is what's telling me where I am if I'm wanting to map it. This is what's discerning between the different qualities. That's actually quite important. I'm mentioning it as a thing you might notice in your experience.

If you don't notice it, no problem at all. It really doesn't matter. But if you do notice it, be careful that you're not latching onto that as your primary indicator.

I don't know what Jason was referring to, but I also find the Buddha's descriptions somewhat confusing and puzzling. He said something like... let me find it again. He described the fourth jhana as arising "with the abandoning of pleasure and pain" - you could also say sukha and dukkha - "as with the earlier disappearance of elation and distress." That's how this particular English translation renders it; the Pali terms are somanassa and domanassa. So with the abandoning of all that, but also with the earlier disappearance - if something had been abandoned earlier, the monk enters and remains in the fourth jhana.

I won't spend too long on this, but let me address it briefly. The "earlier disappearance of elation and distress" - what could that be? Why is it even coming up now? Something has disappeared earlier. It could be the earlier disappearance of piti and the hindrances - piti as elation and the hindrances as distress. The hindrances disappeared in the first jhana, the piti disappeared in the third jhana, so it could be related to that.

Or, probably more accurately with these Pali words somanassa and domanassa, they may refer more to the distress when one actually sees samsara - when one sees the fact that we're living in a world of impermanent things, and even pleasant things are impermanent. There's a kind of distress of the renunciate in that recognition. The elation comes when one realizes there's a path and has confidence that one can follow that path.

I don't know. I've never heard a meditation teacher dwell much on this, and I'm certainly not going to. When you go into the scholarly side, there's a bit of debate. What's he talking about here? Why is he suddenly introducing these terms that he hasn't used before? I don't think it matters too much.

The other phrase - "abandoning of pleasure and pain" - is slightly odd as well, because you could say "with

the subsiding of pleasure and pain." But abandoning is something we do deliberately. The Pali word is pahana, which is also what the Buddha uses when you abandon unskillful ethical behavior. You abandon this or that unwholesome, unskillful quality.

I don't actually think it matters, but what it could be pointing to is what we talked about yesterday when this question came up several times about equanimity. If "abandon" means deliberately letting go of clinging to pleasure or pain - and clinging can be pushing away as well in my language - clinging, pushing away, pulling towards, or hanging onto pleasure and pain. In other words, if I abandon the push-pull, that's something I can do deliberately.

Actually, in this case, the way I would understand it, I'm not even completely abandoning it, because if you remember what we said yesterday, there's actually a whole spectrum here of really, really subtle levels of push-pull clinging. So if I abandon them a lot, but not quite all the way, then what I'm going to end up with, following on from what we said yesterday, when there's less push-pull, it attenuates the vedana. The very pleasantness and unpleasantness eventually just attenuate and become neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So the dominant vedana becomes the neutral one because I've abandoned not so much the pleasure and pain, but I've abandoned any reactivity - or I've abandoned a lot of the reactivity.

It actually gets, as you say, confusing. Why is he introducing this now? Because it seems to suggest another way of going into the jhana through playing with this push-pull dynamic.

So two things. One is about that - okay, so pleasure and pain decrease, pleasant and unpleasant decrease, and one is left with neither pleasant nor unpleasant. But what one can say about that "neither pleasant nor unpleasant" that one is left with is that it's very, very nice. And if it's not, something's not right. It's not the fourth jhana we're talking about. It's very nice and very enjoyable. It's really, again, an improvement over the third jhana and is felt and experienced that way. And it's also somehow a kind of neutral vedana. So that's one thing to bear in mind.

The second, and possibly more important point, is this: all this talk about abandoning pleasure and pain and the earlier disappearance of elation and distress and the different possibilities of what that might mean...

There's a whole scholarly debate here about the precise textual interpretations, with scholars debating whether particular suttas contain mistakes, searching for Chinese parallels and engaging in extensive analysis. But ultimately, I would say it basically points to equanimity. And that's all we need to worry about, I think. That's probably what matters most.

Remember, we were defining equanimity yesterday during the Q&A as not an on-off switch—not black or white, where you either have it or you don't—but rather a spectrum. To the degree that there is equanimity, to that degree there is the reduction of push and pull. There is the reduction of clinging. So equanimity exists on a spectrum.

Another way of understanding this spectrum is that it represents decreasing push-pull, decreasing clinging. Does that make sense?

So I think that's all we need to really understand here. The fourth jhana is pointing to a state of deep equanimity. And as I mentioned yesterday, there are different ways and different contexts in which the Buddha talks about equanimity, and it's a really fascinating subject.

This fourth jhana is what the Buddha would call equanimity based on singleness. This stands in contrast to what he describes on other occasions as equanimity based on multiplicity. So we have equanimity based on singleness versus equanimity based on multiplicity.

What is this singleness and multiplicity of phenomena? Equanimity based on multiplicity means equanimity in relationship to many phenomena happening, many things occurring in the senses. But this fourth jhana is not that, because everything has pretty much disappeared. There is just this translucent, refined, beautiful white stillness—bright white light stillness. The body and everything else has dissolved into just that.

So it's an equanimity based on there being nothing else happening. It's just that single, unified state. Do you understand? This is versus equanimity based on multiplicity, which we touched on yesterday.

An example was when the Buddha talks about the eight worldly conditions: praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure, gain and loss. Victor was asking about the word equanimity in this context. We can have those conditions or those opposites, and we can have equanimity in relationship to those perceptions.

There's the perception of praise and blame. This person tells me I'm wonderful. Another person tells me I'm an idiot, whatever it might be. And the mind can have equanimity in relation to both. What that means at this level—which is very important but represents a more superficial level of equanimity—is equipoise. Equanimity comes from "equi-" meaning equal feeling toward both. I'm not getting super excited and glad when this person praises me, then super depressed or angry when someone blames me. There's equipoise—equal feeling toward opposites. It's not that I like this and don't like that, prefer this or get excited about this while feeling elated about this and distressed about that. This is equanimity in relation to the multiplicity of phenomena. Clear enough?

But again, as I pointed out yesterday in the Q&A, we can have deeper levels of equanimity. For example, following the example I used yesterday about the state of the vastness of awareness—when consciousness opens up and, because of the openness of consciousness and the way one is practicing, it's like letting everything just belong to the space, that vast space of awareness.

After a time it might seem like the bird that was just singing is simply coming out of that silent awareness, and then the sound just disappears back into it. One experiences this with body sensations, thoughts, and everything else. They're all just emanating from what starts to feel like a mystical, divine, forever-lasting

space of peaceful, transcendent awareness. Things simply arise out of that mystical source and disappear back into it.

And then my job as a meditator at that point is simply to let them come and let them go back. Let them be. It's not mine. Let the space contain everything, and let all these phenomena belong to the awareness.

You can hear in what I've just described that there's a relationship. One is practicing a relationship of let it be, let it come, let it go, let it be. Can you hear that? It's a really beautiful way of practicing, an extremely fruitful way of practicing. There's tremendous potential there. It's not particularly difficult—just something that with the right setup of practice, staying with it again and again, practicing that relationship of letting everything belong to the space, letting it come, letting it go, letting it belong to the space.

The very mystical beauty of that space starts to help you let go. It's like the space itself is not doing anything, but the sense of it is almost as if it can do the work. It can do the work of just being there, holding things mystically, being a source—I don't know what you'd call it—a resting place of phenomena. It's almost like the space does the work.

Technically speaking, you're engaging a certain way of looking—an insight way of looking—which is just letting be, letting go, letting go, letting go. This technically means less clinging, less push and pull. Do you understand? Less push and pull. That takes the whole thing deeper and deeper over time.

It might deepen so that the ugly sound and the beautiful sound start to lose their associated vedanā. Exactly what I was saying before starts to happen. The pleasant and unpleasant begin to fade into more neutral phenomena. That neutrality may be impregnated with this mystical divinity, mystical silence, the mystical nature of awareness. But it's not in the particularity of an individual sound that it's pleasant or unpleasant. They've all got that quality, even the ugly sounds.

So the equanimity can deepen, and it can deepen to the sense of one taste, which I mentioned in relation to the third jhāna. Everything in this vastness of awareness—all the sounds, all the sensations, all the thoughts, whatever comes up—can begin at some point to feel like its true essence, its true substance is the same. And that substance is, in this case, mystical, divine, lasting-forever awareness.

So there's a kind of oneness of substance that emerges there. In contrast to a more superficial level of equanimity where we were equanimous in relation to two things that were opposite—praise and blame, pleasure and pain—because everything is one substance, the opposites lose their meaning. They're no longer opposites anymore because they're the same thing, the same substance. They're all, in this case, divine awareness, the awareness of God, whatever you want to call it.

There are many other possibilities that function in the same way, unfolding similarly. A similar thing could happen with a kind of mystical love or mystical compassion—all kinds of possibilities. Really, really lovely. Very available. We just need to set up practice in the right way and follow it.

Lovely as it is, it's still not the end of the road, nor is it the deepest end of equanimity. As I also mentioned yesterday, the ultimate limit of equanimity that's possible is when there are no objects arising anymore because the fading has not just faded the pleasure and pain, the pleasant and unpleasant vedanā—it's actually faded any sense of any object or phenomenon or sensation as well.

So in that ultra-deep equanimity, there are no objects, things, sensations, or phenomena in relation to which a person can be equanimous. There's a strange paradox in the depth of equanimity: the truest equanimity can't really be regarded as equanimity because there's nothing there to be equanimous about.

Here we have in the fourth jhāna an instance of equanimity based on singleness, in complement to other instances where the Buddha talks about equanimity based on multiplicity.

I think it's mostly true to say—predominantly true to say—that at this point in the fourth jhāna, if you check what's the emotion, the most likely and most accurate answer, the answer that's most prevalent, would be that there isn't an emotion. The emotions have been pacified in that state. There's an absence or a pacification of emotion.

Let me say a bit about that and come back to it, perhaps qualifying that statement. This is interesting, you know. This subject of emotion as human beings—I've said it's one of those subjects that I don't think there's any end for us. There shouldn't be an end for us as human beings of our exploration of emotion, even just in our conception of emotion, let alone what we do with emotions and how we relate to them.

Here, what happens—what can actually be quite common for human beings—is that we don't receive much cultural support for this reality: many people are genuinely afraid of their emotions. When a strong emotion arises, there's often a lack of confidence: "I'm not sure I can tolerate this or be with it. I won't end up as a puddle on the floor, or a nervous wreck, or completely out of control."

People relate to this fear in different ways, but it exists primarily because our culture rarely provides training for working skillfully with the heart. To me, dharma practice should be, over time, broadening and deepening the capacity of the heart. We can learn to hold tremendous emotion—we can hold intense emotion.

Consider the grief at what's happening in our world right now. This is genuinely hard to bear, hard to hold. It may be that for many people, this is one reason why—and I don't know if this is true, but perhaps—species loss and climate change and what I used to call species extinction (though I think a more accurate term might be species extermination, mass species extermination) represent simply too much grief to bear. So people avoid it. If you look at what receives the most views each day in newspapers, climate change articles rarely make the top ten.

The same pattern can emerge with personal grief, or even with joy. Sometimes—and we've discussed this bandwidth of happiness—for some people there's a sense of "okay, that's enough now. Can I move on to something else?" Can we hold that much joy? Can we allow that much energy of *piti* to flow through us?

Can we hold that much grief? Can we hold skillful anger or frustration when it arises in ways that are truly large and beneficial?

To me, a huge part of the dharma path involves actually broadening and deepening the capacity—the holding capacity—of the heart. We receive very little training for this in our culture.

But in addition to expanding our capacity for intensity, there's the possibility of developing through dharma practice what we've emphasized from the very beginning: this sensitivity and refinement. This extends not just our range of emotional intensity, but also our range of emotional types—emotions we become aware of, that we notice, that we can tune into. There's tremendous beauty in having this extended palette in our inner life, and then relating from that richness to others, to our beloveds, to the rest of the world, to ourselves, to art.

To me, this is also profoundly important.

But there is, as I mentioned, often a kind of fear among many people in our culture regarding their emotional life. "I'm okay with this range, but if it gets too intense in one direction or another, I'm really not sure I'm okay. I'm really not sure I will be okay."

Yet correspondingly, there can also be—for some people, perhaps even the same person at different times—a fear of the absence of emotion. So when we speak of an absence of emotion in the fourth jhana, sometimes that can sound unsettling. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that," or there might be an idea that this can't be healthy.

Sometimes these ideas about that state—and it's important to remember it's just a temporary state—arise from concepts woven into one's current worldview based on what one is working through psychologically.

I remember when I started meditating, I went a little nuts for a couple of years, as I mentioned briefly. Part of my rehabilitation involved psychotherapy and becoming deeply interested in—and receiving real help with—my emotional life, which had been either extremely volatile without my understanding it, or cut off from certain emotions entirely. I engaged in extensive exploration and opening with emotions, and this work was tremendously helpful.

But I could easily have swung into the opposite view: "If emotion is quiet, then there must be suppression. If emotions are quiet at any point, this must have unhealthy long-term consequences. Authentic being requires emotion—and probably difficult emotion, because those are the more authentic ones."

These kinds of views are actually not uncommon. So there can be, for some people, a fear of emotion. There can be, for other people or the same person at different times, a fear of the quieting, a fear of the absence of emotions. This is an interesting phenomenon to investigate.

Having said there's an absence of emotion in the fourth jhana, it's actually—like all these things—not quite

so simple or black and white, because of several factors.

First, I would say the fourth jhana still contains happiness. It somehow still has happiness within it, but it's so almost invisibly woven into the texture, so impalpably woven into the fabric of the state, so subtle that it's implicit rather than explicit. It takes considerable time to even notice it.

This makes perfect sense, because this state was born out of happiness. Moving through the jhanas, the fourth jhana emerged from happiness—from the happiness of the second jhana and the refined happiness of the third jhana. But this happiness isn't something you notice initially.

I would say it's definitely present. And certainly in the beginning levels of the fourth jhana, it still contains what we might call the echoes or embers of the third jhana's *sukha* and peacefulness—that truly warm, gorgeous peacefulness.

The beginning of the fourth jhana retains these embers—those echoes and remnants from the third jhana's sukha and profound peacefulness. That warm, gorgeous peacefulness still lingers, casting subtle emotional hues and colors throughout this refined space.

Here again, I must contradict what I said earlier about the absence of emotion. The fourth jhana, like all the jhanas, contains metta within it—though now it remains hidden, deeply embedded in the fabric of the state itself.

I've always found it fascinating when the Buddha describes right intention, the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. What does he say these intentions are? He defines them as the intention toward renunciation, the intention toward non-ill will, and the intention toward non-cruelty.

Now, technically speaking, ill will is the far enemy of metta, and cruelty is the far enemy of compassion—they are direct opposites. So why didn't the Buddha simply say "metta and compassion" instead of "non-ill will and non-cruelty"? Sometimes you'll see it translated that way, but I think he chose these particular words deliberately.

He's making a subtle linguistic distinction that allows legitimacy for states exactly like the fourth jhana. Here we find deep equanimity where metta remains pregnant within the experience, but the state itself is characterized by non-ill will and non-cruelty. It's definitely free from these negative qualities, yet the positive emotions aren't necessarily in the foreground.

This careful language creates space for exploring states where everything appears to go quiet, where metta and compassion aren't always foremost, yet they remain woven into the fabric of the experience. So while the fourth jhana can feel like a pacification or absence of emotion, this isn't quite accurate. As always, nothing is as black and white as it first appears.

Several of you have shared how certain images sometimes arise—very briefly or much in the background—that help ignite a jhana or support access to the primary nimitta. These images don't appear

as discursive thoughts but as something subtly supporting the entire experience, propping it up from behind the scenes.

The Buddha's image of being wrapped in white cloth has served this function for me—wrapped in a cloth of pure, luminous stillness. These background images work in that very tinctural way we discussed, in an extremely subtle manner. If I focus too much on the image itself, it becomes more like an imaginal practice. But when they remain very much in the background, they somehow help consolidate and deepen the entire experience, allowing the primary nimitta to become richer—not richer with more imagery, but richer in its essential quality.

One image I used to experience was lying at the bottom of a clear pond filled with lotuses. Picture crystal-clear water, perhaps ten or twenty feet deep, and I'm resting on the bottom, gazing upward at the light filtering down through the water. There's complete rest in this vision—the mind simultaneously so alive and so deeply at peace within this luminosity. Somehow I could breathe underwater in this imaginal space.

Another image that would arise made no rational sense whatsoever. I would feel as if I'd been "completely hung out to dry"—like hanging on a clothesline with pegs on my arms, just suspended there. This doesn't even sound comfortable, yet what it represented was the complete satisfaction that began in the third jhana, now ramped up beyond all conceivable limits. It was as if I'd been thoroughly wrung out, put through the washing machine of this entire process, and then simply hung there in complete fulfillment.

These remain very much secondary nimittas—subtle supportive elements that can help deepen the experience or provide gentle indications of the state's quality.

I believe it's in some commentary that mentions two levels of the fourth jhana, though I'm uncertain what specific levels they're referencing. I could certainly delineate two or even three levels myself, though the exact categorization doesn't really matter.

But what matters is, am I getting to know the territory? Am I getting familiar with the different ranges and substates and textures of this whole space?

So in a way that, yes, this thing about being hung out to dry, that peacefulness and complete contentment that was there at the beginning of the third jhāna, and the deepening echoes of the warmth and tender peacefulness of the third jhāna—they characterize, you could say, the beginning stages of the fourth jhāna. That may be one level we could talk about.

But as it deepens, even those things begin to fade, and they almost become indiscernible, and there's just left this kind of purity, this pure stillness, pure non-movement, pure absence of solidity—free of solidity—pure presence, pure awareness, pure consciousness. There's a sense of purity there that's very beautiful and that comes to predominate.

You could also divide it another way, again like we divided the third jhāna: there's the stillness here in the energy body space, but one might also, as it deepens, get a sense of a much larger realm of stillness. But again, as we said with the third jhāna, the primary focus wants to be in the energy body space. I'm not yet going out there—that comes later. I'm not yet exploring the far reaches of this realm of stillness. I want to be primarily here for the fourth jhāna to really consolidate and deepen and really bathe in its nectar.

You could make three levels or two levels—this two or that two. It doesn't really matter. For me it doesn't matter. I think the invitation though is again to discern more, to get to really know spaces inside out and get really familiar with them.

So how does it progress to the fourth jhāna? How do we do that? Well, mostly through the maturing of the third jhāna. Over time, long-term maturing of the third jhāna will just deliver the fourth jhāna—it should at some point.

Eventually, how do we get to the fourth jhāna? Well, the same way with all that mastery business. Eventually, it's just by subtle intention. Through the familiarity of going to this space, this level, the fourth jhāna eventually, we just remember that stillness, remember that state, remember that beauty and purity, and it can come back just from the intention.

What can help, if it's ready to mature, if it's maturing and just needs a little help—and sometimes you don't even need to do that little bit of nudging—but what can help is noticing within the third jhāna, noticing and tuning to, well, let's say two things: the stillness and equanimity in the third jhāna.

So third jhāna has peacefulness, but as I said, it also has a lot of stillness in it. It's not completely still, but if I tune to the element or the feeling or the sense of stillness, the frequency of stillness in it—again, that's going to stand out and it may help the whole thing deepen because what I tune to gets amplified. And in this case, the amplification is a deepening.

So tuning to the stillness, noticing and then tuning to, really tuning to the stillness or equanimity in the third jhāna. Or noticing and tuning to whatever the most refined frequency is in the third jhāna. Because again, as we move from jhāna to jhāna, there's an increase in refinement. So tuning to what's most refined is a general principle—not just applies to this—that will help take me to the next level. And the stillness of the fourth jhāna will begin to emerge.

I would say, again, that a bit like what we said with the third jhāna, the fourth jhāna will be better—it will feel better, more compelling, more clear, more clearly discriminated, more fulfilling and all that—when it actually has within it, and you can feel within it, some of that profound and beautiful, tender gentleness that goes with the third jhāna. In other words, the beginnings of the fourth jhāna, when they have that kind of experience, that usually ends up being a much richer fourth jhāna experience, even if later on they kind of refine out. They can get subtler and subtler and then they get purified out. There's this luminous stillness.

You can play with the same things really: opening the body and opening the mind to it. Opening, abandoning, surrendering, or penetrating—same modes of attention. Or you can think about dissolving, which I think I mentioned before, but somehow at this level, it gets really, really potent for me, this word dissolving. What would it be to dissolve my body into this luminous, beautiful stillness? Dissolve my body into it. The body becomes that, but the body also just dissolves in it. So there's a movement of intention there. There's a direction there.

And again, just as in the third jhāna, we said sometimes there can be a kind of felt sense of bifurcating or splitting between the mind and the body a little bit, just subtly. Again, at first, it's body and mind totally integrated—they're just really into it. And then with a lot of fourth jhāna experience, sometimes you can feel like, oh, body and mind. And then dissolving my body, and other times dissolving my mind. What is it to dissolve the mind into this luminous stillness and to play with that kind of intention.

So at times those feel like separate intentions, separate processes. Ideally they're one, but it doesn't matter. This is again—we're getting out of this thinking of a jhāna as a very neat, defined, black and white on-off switch or a box. And it's more just territory here. And okay, now I dissolve my body and then I dissolve my mind. Doesn't matter if they're separate. So jhāna practice is a broader thing, rather than worrying about those edges of "Is this it?"

Is it not it? Is it right? Is it wrong? But like always, we want to really penetrate and get intimate—really get inside and intimate with this luminous stillness. And remembering that the primary nimitta is this purity of refined stillness.

A funny thing can happen that you might have witnessed or experienced: sometimes in the fourth jhana, what can be quite common is a kind of leaning forward. The physical body actually starts leaning forward. This can be—I don't know how common this is—actually leaning forward, and it can be really, really extreme. Someone sitting cross-legged on the floor actually ends up with their forehead on the floor. Someone might think, "Oh, they're fast asleep." Or they see them going like this and think they're fast asleep. Far from it.

The nodding looks very different and feels very different. You can tell the difference between these things. They're quite—they both involve a leaning forward—but they're really quite different phenomena.

Ajahn Mahabua was one of the great—he died not that long ago—one of the great twentieth-century Thai forest meditation masters. He used to say in relation to this leaning forward: don't alter it at all. Don't mess with it. The process is happening; you let it happen. And if your forehead ends up on the floor, you let it end up on the floor.

I had a teacher who said, as soon as you start noticing that happening, stop it and just make sure you can sit upright. So there are differences of opinion.

I admit, over the years I've gotten into what I wouldn't call a bad habit, but a habit that I slightly regret. I

do lean forward, and sometimes quite a lot. Looking back, it would have been better had I nipped that habit in the bud and not allowed it to develop, because it can be a little distracting as things go on. But it's certainly not a tragedy. However, I'm saying this now so that if you encounter it, you can perhaps nip it in the bud and make an intention to sit upright—stop it when it's happening. But even if it does happen, sometimes you can very gently sit up, keeping the meditation going.

What's happening here? I don't know. I'm not sure percentage-wise how common this is, but it's really not uncommon. Is it that we're conceiving of our attention as something that operates forwards? And so the stillness is in front of us, and we generally conceive of our attention—I know I can hear something back there, but because the eyes go that way and the nose is there and the mouth is there, the sense organs are in the head and they're pointing that way—is it that we just habitually conceive of our attention going forwards, and then we conceive of the stillness primarily in front of us, and that's why we're leaning forwards?

Do you remember, you can play with a few things here, and I think it's worth trying to nip this in the bud if it starts to come up for you. You can play with almost imagining the stillness 360 degrees, like the Buddha's analogy: wrapped around the body. So it's 360 degrees around—it's a scaffolding of stillness, almost. It's right around the body space, keeping it upright, because there's as much support, as much presence of the scaffolding in front as behind, as to the sides. Playing with that 360 degrees prevents us from the habit of feeling and sensing objects in the mind being somewhat in front of us. In a way, my attention is pulled equally, equanimously, in all directions. There's maybe less chance of falling over forwards.

Remember on the opening evening when I introduced counting with the breath and actually said to play with it behind? Getting used to playing with breathing in from the back, getting used to turning around in physical space 180 degrees—the sense of where we're paying attention and which direction the attention moves in can bear significant fruits later on when it comes to something like this.

So it could be something like that. It could also be—and I don't know, I've never really talked to anyone about this—that what starts to happen at this level is a significant degree of unfabricating. We've talked a little bit about that. Some of you are very familiar with this teaching, but it's related to what I said about equanimity. As we let go of more and more clinging in the moment, there's less and less push and pull, less and less clinging. Then we talked about the vedana—the pleasant and unpleasant are actually fabricated less. Less and less and less and less. So there's more and more unfabricating. Less and less fabricating of what? Well, of self, but also in this case of perception and sensation. Less and less and less, until at certain points the sensations don't even arise.

Less and less and less. There's more unfabricating. There's quite a degree of unfabricating at this point, at the point of the fourth jhana. Unfabricating is quite a degree of deconstructing or non-constructing going on.

Sometimes I wonder, is this sort of falling over just a kind of reflection in the body of the kind of unfabricating that's going on? There's less construction, because it also happens for me sometimes—and again it's a habit; if I could go back I would change—but it can also occur when you're deep in insight ways of looking and they're working primarily with this unfabricating, working with deeply letting go, and a similar sort of thing happens. I don't know, I'm not sure, but it's worth knowing about and working with. It's part of the territory potentially here. And it may be something that comes to bother you if you don't nip it in the bud, or it may be like—I don't think it's that much of an issue for me—but for some people they feel like, oh, I really wish, et cetera.

Probably a more significant thing to look out for is that again, after many experiences going in and out of the fourth jhana and getting used to it—you remember what I said about a dam bursting when you reach a new level and it's just like, wow, it's just happening. I don't have to do anything. It's just perfect as it is. And then after a while, it's like, ah, now some more subtle work and play. I see the need for that and the potential for that.

So one thing that can happen, a kind of problem that emerges after quite a lot of experience going in and out of the fourth jhana, is that sometimes one's there and it's very nice, it's very still, the mind is definitely very mindful, very equanimous, very focused, but it's just a fraction dull. So there's no nodding, there's none of that. The whole thing is much, much more subtle. It's very subtly, very slightly dull at times.

This actually is an important thing to notice, to look out for and notice. It's still a state of equanimity, of mindfulness, of clear awareness and all the rest of it, of focus, of samadhi, but just relatively to what it could be, it's just a little bit dull. That's a really important thing to take note of. It's just gone into that slight dullness. Can I ramp up in this moment the sense of presence? Just turn up the sense of presence. I'm present to this primary nimitta, to this stillness. There's a presence there, a real aliveness of presence.

One of the ways you can do this is really come into the sense of now, now, now. It's now. This thing is now. This stillness is now. And really come sharply into the sense of now with presence. It's two ways of saying the same thing. And that allows it to become brighter and more alive.

There are many instances, like I said, where the Buddha talks about the jhanas in the Pali Canon. There are some instances where he sort of does it in a certain formula, and other instances where he does it in another formula, and other instances where in a third kind of formula or way of explaining. And there's one of these sort of stock, almost contrived formulas where he goes through the first four jhanas and describes them as we've just described them. And then he says, "Then the practitioner, then the monk"—he's usually talking about monks—"thus with mind," which means something like he, the monk, with a citta, with a mind-heart, with an awareness, thus meaning from the jhanas.

The usual translation you'll hear is "concentrated," but actually it means "samadhi-fied"—partly why I'm wanting to dwell on this. And he goes through a whole list. So what he's going to do is go through a whole list describing what the practitioner has got from their practice of the jhanas or the first four jhanas, and

then describing what they then do with that, how they put that mind to work. And there are different formulas and different contexts, depending on who he's talking to and what he's describing.

But what's often translated, for example, after the first four jhanas is: "Then the practitioner, with a mind thus concentrated." So I'm just wanting to point out—we've dwelt on this a number of times—what's the difference if we translate samadhi as "concentration" or we leave it as samadhi? We talked about this, right?

So to me, samadhi is the richer word and I don't get narrowed into that view of what—because it's very easy to read these texts and take certain conclusions. And I want to actually take the time going through this and indicate how we can read these passages and the translations of these passages and just assume it means "with a mind very concentrated" and very stuck, very able to stay steady with one thing, and very like a laser beam. All these words are very easy to hear that way. I'm going to bother to go through the Pali and actually see how there are different ways we can open this out.

So that's the first one. With a citta, with a mind thus samadhi-fied, thus harmonized in agreement. To me, it's got a whole different range and richness of what's involved there, rather than just "concentrated."

Then he said, so with the mind thus samadhi-fied, and then he goes on to other adjectives: with the mind thus, not just samadhi-fied, but parisuddhe, which means "purified." What might that mean? Purified. Purified of what? Okay, but that should have come with the first jhana.

Of vedana, of hindrances—it could mean all kinds of things. What I'm pointing to is how easy it is to read these texts and listen to dharma talks already programmed to hear a certain narrow range of meaning which is not necessarily there. It could also be purified of relative grossness—when you refine something. I want to open up these possibilities.

Yes, hindrances and subtle hindrances. Yes, pleasure and pain. Yes, relative grossness. What is happening here? Because this is the point—the Buddha has gone through the first four jhanas and then explains to someone what the point of it is. Again, we return to this whole question we've explored so much at the beginning of this retreat: What's the point of this? Why are we doing this? What are we going to emphasize? What's important here?

So the mind could be purified of who knows what—grossness, subtle hindrances, pleasure, pain. But then the Buddha repeats this: parisuddhe pariyodāte, which also means pure. This word pariyodāta also means very clever or excellent or accomplished. Sometimes it's translated as bright. In English, that word carries the same ambiguity—"Oh, she's very bright."

As I said, there is this sense of visual luminosity there, but it's really a kind of brightness of presence. When we talk about a bright person, it's also that they're bright in presence. It's not just that they're very good at doing Rubik's cubes or whatever. The mind is bright with presence, but also bright with possibility. When we say someone is bright, there's possibility there.

This translation of bright points to a very pure realm of still light. The purity is interesting if we linger here, because it's also related to the stillness. Stillness itself is something pure—purity of push-pull, purity of equanimity.

Again, just expanding on the possible meanings. When you say a person has a really pure character, it's like saying they have a lot of integrity, which is also like saying they can't be bribed by something pleasant or blackmailed by the threat of something unpleasant. Do you understand? So the purity could refer to something like that—how is the mind in its poise right now in relation to the threat and the dangling carrot of unpleasant and pleasant?

Opening up meanings—it's so easy to hear and read just what we already know, what we've already been told. That's the most common way, unfortunately, for human beings to hear and read: to simply hear and read what we already know.

It could also be pure in refinement. If you think about something like gold—you mine gold, gather it, and it's got other stuff in it. To purify gold is also to refine gold. The mind is getting down to something of its pure, nearer to its pure natural nature. Words like pure can mean many different things, and I think the text is pregnant with all those meanings rather than being brought down to just one.

Then the Buddha continues with more adjectives describing this mind after meditation, after the fourth jhana: anaṅgaṇa, which is something like passionless or blameless or unblemished, and vigataupakkilesa, which means something like free, without defilements or obstructions. Mudubhūta, which means malleable, pliant, supple.

Later there are passages where the Buddha does this same description and really picks up on that quality, saying like a goldsmith who has this substance—now they've got their gold, molten gold—then they can shape it however they like. Malleable, malleable, malleable.

That may be, in my view, one of the really centrally important fruits of all this. I stressed it at the beginning of the retreat—malleability, that one of the main fruits of jhana practice is the malleability of perception.

So it's here now. *Kamaniye*, which means workable, able to be put to work or directed in a certain way. *Thite*, which means steady. And then the last one, *aninjapatte*, which means attained to imperturbability.

It's very easy, I think, to hear or read that in context and just read it very quickly, thinking, "Yes, it means the mind is now absolutely nailed to its object. It doesn't move. It's imperturbable." But does it only point to that? Might it also point again to equanimity, which we've been talking about, and the quietening of the push and pull?

Push and pull throws the mind out of balance. When you're exerting a thought, you're pulled by something or trying to hang on to something or pushing something away—it throws the mind out of

balance. And so it could be that the imperturbability refers, or refers as well, or maybe even refers principally, less to a complete ability to fix the mind's attention on something unwaveringly and more to this capacity not to be swayed. It's steady, it's unshakable, it's imperturbable. I'm not swayed by my reactivity to any phenomenon—pleasant, unpleasant, or otherwise.

But really the point here is again just to illustrate, in a much larger context, how very easily we can hear and read and basically hear and read what we already know. And we're learning very little new. Things are not being opened up or challenged. In this particular case, to open up the view—and it's related to what are we doing here, why are we doing this, and therefore what's important of all the different things that are going on when we practice samadhi and all the different things that we could emphasize. And again, how much what we emphasize, how much the big picture view will end up directing us consciously or unconsciously, wisely or unwisely, in terms of our micro moment-to-moment choices.

And then he says *cittam abhinirati* and *abhininameti*, which basically directs or applies the *citta*, inclines or bends the *citta* towards. And then he gives a whole bunch of things that you can then do with the mind or direct your awareness to. One of them is vipassana practice or certain kinds of vipassana practice.

I want to point something else out about that sutta. Here he is speaking, explaining to someone, this person or that person. It's a kind of contrived educational situation, a contrived formula in a way. He goes through the first four jhanas, he gives the stock descriptions. And then he gives this whole list of "and thus the monk with the mind does this and this and this and this." The whole thing is a very stock, contrived formula.

But to me, it's important not to get misled by that contrived formula and actually see the sutta in context—that it *is* a contrived formula. It's a kind of educational heuristic technique he's using. It doesn't then mean that we should do jhana one followed by jhana two followed by jhana three followed by jhana four and then decide "okay, now I'm going to do this." Again, it's very easy to read a sutta like that and just take it without really understanding it as a heuristic tool, as an educational tool. It's a contrived formula. It doesn't mean that that's how we meditate. But there are some people who would teach that way because it says, well, one, two, three, four, and then you do this, then you do your vipassana. And there may be other situations where there's one, two, three, up to eight, and then you do vipassana. But these are just—do you understand what I mean by contrived? It's not really a strict instruction for practice.

A couple of things. If any of you, or any of your future selves, or anyone listening to this anywhere at any time, if ever you decide that you would like to really get deep into jhana practice and you find yourself in that territory and you want to devote some time to it—jhanas and how they work with insight so beautifully and fruitfully—once you got to this stage, it can be really helpful to almost make the fourth jhana your base.

I know a monk who teaches this. A famous monk from the mid-20th century in Thailand, a Thai forest monk, one of my teacher's teachers, said, "Make the fourth jhana your base." It's like a hub. And from

there, you can go to lots of places. And it's this place of very bright, very steady, but not very warm awareness and consciousness.

I would like to say make the third and fourth jhana your base. If you ever get to that level of practice and you decide you're really into this, make the third and fourth because the third has such a lovely, warm, healing space. It's such a lovely, warm, healing space. So you make the third and fourth your base and then venture out backwards in the jhanas, forwards in the jhanas to different insight practices. And that becomes home base.

But having said that, as I mentioned, some of you will never want to do that. And you should never feel that you should do that. You don't have to develop jhanas to that degree.

You don't have to develop jhanas to any degree. Sometimes people say they need the jhanas—perhaps because I've emphasized something or they've heard something—they need the jhanas to get insight. I don't think it's true. There is a passage where the Buddha says, "Without jhana, there's no liberation. Without insight, there's no liberation." But I'm not sure about that interpretation.

You might have heard me say something that was simply contextual. When I first started talking publicly about jhanas here more than ten years ago, the context was much more anti-jhana—much more dismissive and poo-pooing, thinking they were a ridiculous waste of time or a dead end or dangerous. So teaching happens within a context. I might really emphasize their importance, but you don't need the jhanas.

Sometimes people think, because I emphasize their healing qualities, that they need the jhanas to heal. You probably don't. They can be very healing, but it's very rare that someone actually needs the jhanas to heal and couldn't heal in some other way.

However, having said that, what you may need to heal—much more than the jhana itself—is some of what we've been emphasizing in our way of working. For instance, when we talk about opening and really opening, really abandoning and really surrendering, that may be much more significant in a person's healing than the attainment of this or that jhana. Because that person may, for lots of different reasons, have quite a limited ability to really open, or they think they're really opening when actually it's only halfway, or to be really wholehearted.

These capacities—however they come—may be necessary. I think it's probably rare that an actual jhana is necessary when nothing else would give that kind of healing for a certain person. But to be able to open as a human being—I mean really open, open the energy body and open—that may well be quite significant because it has to do with much more than the attainment of a state in meditation. It has to do with one's relationship with life and existence, relationship with others, sexuality—all kinds of things.

Do you remember we talked about the cooking ingredients? Similar thing here. If you're in the fourth jhana and you want to go to the third jhana, what do you need to grab from the shelf and add? Yes, sukha.

You just reach for your sukha and pour in the sukha, and fourth jhana plus sukha should deliver you to the third jhana. It's a handy trick, but again, part of the art of all this and the malleability of perception—the art of playing with perception.

I think I mentioned this already, but it's worth stating again: probably over time, through repeated experiences with the third and fourth jhana and the deeper jhanas—jhanas from three onwards—their increased refinement will actually have the effect of refining the piti in the first jhana. Not so much retroactively, but when you come back to the piti and the first jhana, they will usually calm it and maybe refine it as well. When you go to these other jhanas repeatedly and then come back, your sense of what the first jhana is begins to change. Again, that's part of why the post-it notes. This may happen with other jhanas, with the sukha, and so forth.

All the business about mastery applies here as well. All the elements of mastery—you can play with them here. They're just the same: ability to sustain, ability to summon at will, ability to ping pong, ability to go for walks outside, all the rest of it.

Because now you've got more jhanas to play with, there are increased leapfrog ping pong permutation possibilities. You can be jumping all over and practice that. Once you get to this point, you want to practice a little bit at the end—just having some fun at the end of sittings, moving around and seeing how rapidly you can move. But mostly you want to be marinating and really marinating in this. It does something very profound to the consciousness, to the being.

Let's have some quiet together.

Thank you, everyone, and time for tea.

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